



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE BIBLICAL WORLD

CONTINUING

The Old and New Testament Student

VOLUME VIII.

OCTOBER, 1896

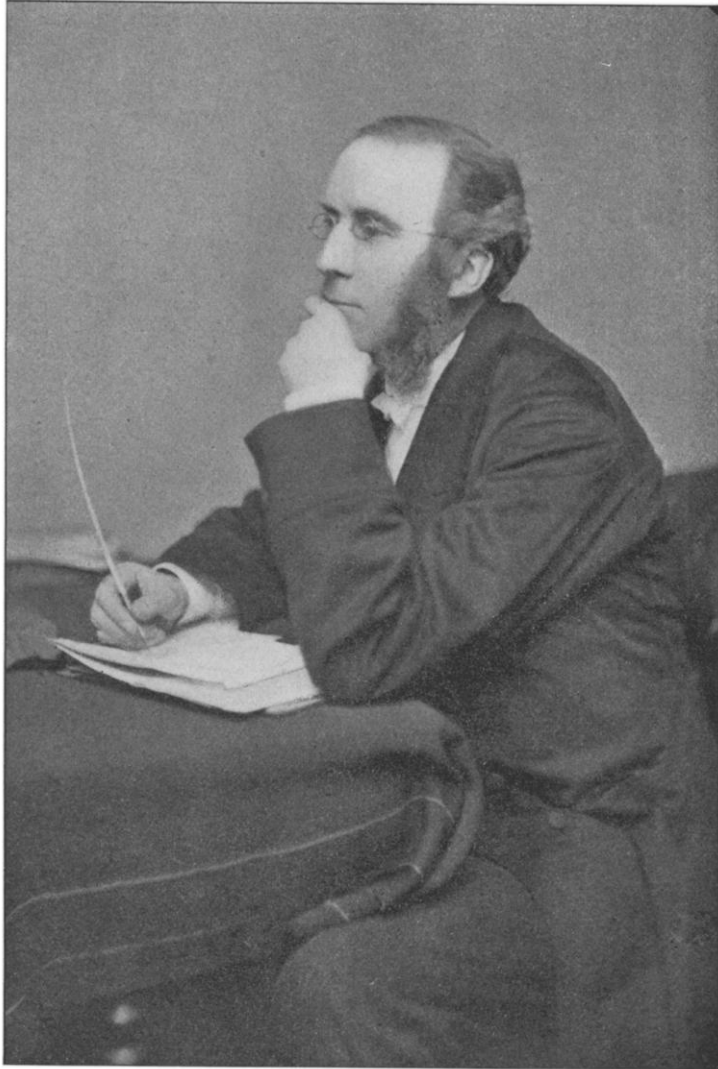
NUMBER 4

THE REV. A. B. DAVIDSON, D.D., LL.D., PROFESSOR OF
HEBREW IN THE NEW COLLEGE, EDINBURGH.

By PROFESSOR ALEXANDER BALMAIN BRUCE, D.D.,
Free Church College, Glasgow.

I CANNOT offer readers of this sketch such biographic data concerning its subject as I was able to supply in the cases of Doctors Dods and Smith. I have not been negligent but simply unsuccessful in finding what I sought. The oracle was silent. Of this I have no *special* cause to complain, as even ladies have been known to hint with a subdued murmur that their invitations to dinner have sometimes been left unanswered, or answered only after a weary while. So for dates and historic data I give as a substitute a psychologic trait. You have to do with a character this time.

Some things, indeed, cannot be hid. That the renowned professor is an Aberdonian is manifest to everyone who hears his voice. His speech "bewrayeth" him. "The voice edged with raw accent of Aberdeen comes shrill upon you as if forced from lips of rock." And the word corresponds to the temper of the man and of the race he belongs to: keen, flinty, cold, not unkindly at heart, but ashamed to show kindness; reserved, repressive, undemonstrative, a fact explaining much in his career.



A. B. DAVIDSON

It may be taken for granted that young Davidson was educated first in one of those notable Aberdeenshire parish schools that have scholars for their masters, and have sent forth many a pupil to fame and distinction, then at the Academy of Aberdeen, and finally at the University of the same city.

My acquaintance with him began in my own student days, and, speaking from recollection, I should say that he is a man of my own age, born say in 1830 or 1831. He was then a student of *Hebrew*, hard at work on Semitic roots, but thriving wonderfully on that spare diet; wearing a fresh, rosy-colored face, suggestive of a life spent mainly on golf courses amid bracing sea-breezes, rather than in a student's "den," into which the sun rarely shone, and littered with dusty tomes. His proficiency in eastern tongues was well known, and hence he obtained the post of Hebrew tutor in the New College, Edinburgh, under the celebrated "Rabbi" Duncan, the professor of Hebrew in the same college. Who has not heard of *him*? To whom have not been told one or more of the innumerable anecdotes illustrative of his unworldly simplicity and absent-mindedness? Those who want to know something about the genius as well as the eccentricities of this Edinburgh celebrity should enquire for the *Colloquia Peripatetica* of Professor Knight, of St. Andrews, like myself one of his students, and, like all his students, cherishing for the "Rabbi" a tender affection which has helped him to "Boswellize" his memory in a manner worthy of all praise.

In due time Davidson became Duncan's colleague and successor. He published his first work to promote his candidature for the chair. It was *A Commentary Grammatical and Exegetical on the Book of Job, with a translation*, and bears the date of 1862. It was only a fragment of the projected work. It has on its title-page "Vol. I." There never was a second, though in the closing sentence of his preface the author says: "The second volume, which, unless unforeseen circumstances interfere, will speedily follow, will naturally be somewhat larger than the present." The unforeseen happened. Davidson got the chair, and preoccupation with its duties led to indefinite postponement of the project. The contribution he made in 1884 of a volume on Job to

the Cambridge Bible Series compensated in some measure for the loss. But only in some measure, most will agree in thinking. For that first book of Davidson's was in some important respects his best. He let himself out in it more than in any subsequent publication. The book is full of exact scholarship, but there is more in it than that ; moral fervor, enthusiasm, welcome to all his admirers, and rather conspicuous by their absence in later productions. Job was a splendid theme for him ; for there is poetry, philosophy, and skepticism (in no sinister sense) in him enough to enable him to do full justice to its tragic grandeur.

Davidson has been a phenomenal success as a professor. He has been the hero of the New College for successive bands of students during the last thirty years. Scholarship, literary felicity, teaching power, and personal idiosyncrasy combine to make him at once a great master, and a pet. The students reverently sit at his feet, and laugh at his caustic humor. He has sent forth from his class a number of well-trained scholars large enough to make a school. He taught William Robertson Smith who has taught the English-speaking world the mysteries of criticism. To the honorable company of his disciples belong Harper of Armond College, Melbourne, Skinner of the English Presbyterian College, London, and George Adam Smith of the Free Church College, Glasgow, all three important contributors to the popular interpretation of the Old Testament along critical lines. Other men might be named, but let these suffice.

Of Professor Davidson, as of Rabbi Duncan, numerous anecdotes are repeated in the circle of his old students. The following, obtained from a reliable source, afford a glimpse into the class room. To a student struggling with the Hebrew letters of a passage the professor remarked : " Don't you think it a pity, Mr. —, that the prophets didn't write in English ? " A student called on to construe excused himself saying : " Not prepared today, sir ! " To which the professor replied : " *Today*, Mr. Tomkins." A student was translating from an interleaved Hebrew and English Bible. The passage was the first three verses of one of the short Psalms (from cxx onwards). Another student having read the Hebrew the culprit gave what he supposed to be

its English equivalent, his eye lighting on the wrong place on the English page. The professor waited patiently till he had finished, then quietly said, "Thank you, Mr. — ; a very good translation of the first three verses of the *next* psalm." The professorial criticisms of Hebrew Discourses, read, as is the custom, in the class, supply a list of characteristic anecdotes. Excessive eulogy is not in our hero's line ; dry humor, sometimes withering contemptuous censure is more to his taste, as may be seen from this solitary sample : "A thoroughly unsatisfactory performance. The conception is vulgar, the execution jejune, and the scholarship starved." Such criticism is apt to leave a permanent wound in the unhappy subject. But all but the one unfortunate might relish it, and reminiscences of the kind enhance the charm of an admired master.

Everyone knows something about Dr. Davidson as an author. Besides the two books on Job, published respectively in 1862 and 1884, he has given to the world the following: the article "Job" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, an introductory Hebrew Grammar which has gone through many editions (ed. I in 1874), a work on the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Bible handbooks published by Messrs. T. and T. Clark (in 1886), and another, more recently published, on Ezekiel. He has also been a somewhat liberal contributor to the well-known monthly, *The Expositor*, in whose pages have appeared series of articles on Hosea (1879), 2 Isaiah (1883-4), Amos (1887), Joel (1888), from his skilful hand, all valuable though not yet collected in book form. Of these publications the best known to me is the book on the Epistle to the Hebrews, which, as belonging to my own line of study, I have had occasion to read carefully. Like all Dr. Davidson's works it is, from the point of view of exact scholarship, masterly. Yet I am constrained to confess that it is to me a most disappointing book. A perfect *verbal* commentary, it somehow misses the spirit of the whole. In his *Founders of Old Testament Criticism* Professor Cheyne characterizes it as "a dry but very able work." I subscribe to this estimate, only I would invert the order of the epithets and say "very able but dry," laying the emphasis on the latter quality. It is dry

because the author does not truly conceive the historical situation with its tragic pathos. He regards the author as the repeater of theological commonplaces to a church quite familiar with his teaching, but needing encouragement under severe outward trial, instead of being the prophetic suggester of fresh conceptions meant for the benefit of a community which has no insight into the genius of the Christian religion. And so the book remains *dead*, and the *soul* of the writer unrevealed, while his *words* are skilfully expounded.

One wonders how such a miscarriage could happen in the hands of so gifted a man, and is tempted to theorize about it. I have sometimes thought that Dr. Davidson had too much deference for Dr. Bernhard Weiss, who, while an expert in criticism, is rather prosaic and unsympathetic in exegesis. But I do not suppose that counts for much. More stress is to be laid on his severely historic method of interpretation which makes him over-jealous of anything like reading into Bible texts modern ideas. Thus his Old Testament studies have produced a tendency to minimize the new element in the New Testament. The new era of grace, for such a tendency, has very little novelty. It is Judaism + an infinitesimal increment. For me there is a wide gulf between the Hebrew church and the writer of this epistle. They are Judaists but he is not; rather he is one who sees the glory of Christianity as the religion of perfect unrestricted fellowship between man and God, and therefore perennial, as opposed to Levitical religion which kept men remote from God in fear; the religion of spiritual reality as opposed to Leviticalism, the religion of shadows and of cosmic furniture doomed to pass away.

Dr. Davidson has rather disappointed his admirers even in the region of criticism. He has not kept his place in the van of the movement which he created. He has rather lagged behind or stood on one side, while the company of the prophets marched past, wondering what had possessed them. He kept all but silent while the Robertson Smith controversy raged. As fresh contributions to criticism make their appearance he contents himself with poking fun at the weaknesses of the contribu-

tors. The following is a specimen of the style in which he handles the Germans occasionally in the pages of *The Critical Review*: "The criticism of the Pentateuch is a great historical drama which needs to be put upon the stage with appropriate scenery and circumstance. When performed by a company of prophets called J. E. D. P. with all their little ones down to J³ and P* it loses its impressiveness. It will not be strange if some spectators mistake the nature of the performance and go home with the impression that they have been witnessing a farce." In an article in the *Expository Times* for January of this year he speaks about "PAOS" being as inaccessible "as the uncreated exemplar of the Koran which is in heaven," and of Wellhausen he caustically observes: "Wellhausen has assured us that Jehovah has unaccountable moods, and no doubt his servant in Göttingen is subject to the same infirmity." This is excellent fooling, and one does not grudge an occasional outburst of this kind to a man with a deep vein of humor in him. And it must be acknowledged that the Germans with their "vigor and rigor" lay themselves very open to the sport of the wit. Yet we look for more than banter from the acknowledged head of the critical school in Scotland. It is not for him to select the rôle of jester while the critical drama goes on. Such is the feeling of many in Britain. Dr. Cheyne has given expression to it in his work on the *Founders of Old Testament Criticism* already referred to. "One only asks," he says in one place, "why this able scholar has not sought more opportunities of helping forward critical study. He is himself the loser by his excessive caution. For how can that introduction to biblical theology which we are eagerly expecting from him be produced without the aid of a wisely bold higher criticism?" But we must be considerate in our complaints. Temperament has much to do with this reticence. Dr. Davidson is a shy, retiring, modest man who has no idea of his own importance in the world in which he lives. "Why," he thinks to himself, "cannot I be allowed to withdraw into a quiet corner and look on while men play their parts?" The late Professor Bensley of Cambridge spoke to me in terms of high commendation of the Scotch members of the Old Tes-

tament Revision Company, and especially of Dr. Davidson. He added, "His only fault is that he is too quiet." That is the man all over in all relations, all through his life. He invariably takes a back seat. His behavior presents a refreshing contrast to that of others whom we all know whose one aim and effort it is to push their way to the front and make great men of their little selves.

Dr. Davidson can *preach* as well as teach beautifully though not with great popular effect, wisely and gracefully if not eloquently. One who knows him well, writing about him in the *British Weekly*, remarks: "He is, if ever man was, a preacher *malgré lui*. Providence and himself conspired against it, and both have failed." Another writer in a magazine, expressing personal admiration for the professor's preaching gifts, reports this comment on a sermon of his, overheard by a gentleman as he walked along the street talking to a friend: "Davidson gets worse and worse." You see how it is: the praise of the wise and the censure of fools is the reward of this preacher, as of many another of whom the world is not worthy. If you want to hear Davidson, you need not go to one of the large West End churches where fashionable audiences assemble. You are more likely to find him in a mean building, in a meaner street, preaching to a small congregation of common folks. The back seat once more. He does not think he is a great preacher. He probably doubts if he can preach at all; if the exquisite studies on Scripture he offers his hearers deserve the name of sermons.

This invincible modesty is felt also in society. In whatever company our professor appears he is ever a silent man listening while others talk who have not half so much to say. When I was minister in a church in Broughty Ferry, near Dundee, I got together a dinner party of clergymen, etc., who happened to be taking their holiday in the neighborhood. We were a lively company and the talk was brisk and interesting. After it had lasted a while and at a lull in the conversation, a well-known minister from London, himself quite a character, put his big, open hand on Davidson's small, finely shaped head, and said "I wonder

what's in that pow of yours." There was doubtless a good deal in the "pow," but its owner had kept it all to himself.

With all drawbacks Dr. Davidson is a man to be devoutly thankful for. He is not a great actor, not even a great character; only a scholar, a clear thinker who can put his thoughts before you in clean-cut, crisp sentences with a diamond sparkle in them. Scotland must look elsewhere for its Luther. But in Davidson it has at least an *Erasmus*.